

Sights and insights: Vocational outdoor students' learning through and about reflective practice in the workplace

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Abstract

Outdoor leader and adventure sport education in the United Kingdom has been characterized by an over-emphasis on technical skills at the expense of equally important, but often marginalized intra- and inter-personal skills necessary for contemporary outdoor employment. This study examined the lived experience of vocational outdoor students in order firstly to identify what was learned about the workplace through using reflective practice, and secondly, what was learned about reflective practice through this experience. The study used a purposive sample of students (n=15) who were invited to maintain reflective journals during summer work experience, and this was followed up with semi-structured interviews. Manual Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed that in the workplace setting, students used reflective practice to understand and develop technical proficiency, support awareness of the value of theory, and acted as a platform to express emergent concepts of "professionalism." Lessons about reflective practice emphasized its value in social settings, acknowledging different ways of reflection, and understanding and managing professional life beyond graduation.

Keywords: learning, reflective practice, workplace

Background

There is both increased and diverse demand for outdoor experiences in the UK where the outdoor sector seems to be in good health and continues to experience growth (Ogilvie, 2013). According to the Institute for Outdoor Learning, the UK market is growing at a steady rate of 3.5% per annum (Outdoor Employers' Group (OEG), 2011). By way of example, in 2011 adventure tourism in England's Lake District was estimated as generating £75–£100 million, and in North Wales over £140 million (OEG, 2011, p. 7). Moreover, in 2013, Sharpe (2013) estimated that nature-based tourism in Scotland was worth an annual £1.4 billion. Furthermore, in 2013 the British Mountaineering Council citing the Active People Survey suggested that about 246,000 people aged 16+ went climbing or walking at least once a month in the UK, and that indoor climbing walls were registering over five million visits annually (Gardner, 2013; Sport England, 2013). Similarly, Canoe England (2013) reported that over one million people canoe each year, making it the most popular water sport for the eleventh year running. The above scoping data clearly indicate that outdoor experiences are an important phenomenon in the UK.

Additionally, Skills Active suggests that despite recent economic austerity the outdoor sector has experienced growth above the national average, employment growing by 30% between 2001–2008, with increasing opportunities in "a diverse range of career pathways" (2010, p. 4). The Warwick Institute for Employment Research (2010) suggests the main drivers behind this expansion of opportunity are an increased demand for health-orientated sport and recreation, an ageing population with the time,

resources, and aspirations for active retirement, and a broader government policy to increase access and participation in the outdoors.

However, both Skills Active and the European Qualification Framework for Outdoor Animators (EQFOA, 2006) caution that a younger than average working population characterizes this workforce (aged 18–24 years) and that alongside the demand for discipline-specific technical skills there are increasing emphases on intra- and inter-personal skills.

Training and educating the workforce

Conventionally, much of the training that has been provided for the leaders of outdoor activities in the UK has focused on procedural knowledge, or in other words, the technical "how-to" skills of the various disciplines (Martindale & Collins, 2005) and has been achieved through the technical-rational approach, the limitations of which are recognized by Schön (1983). The focus on acquiring and demonstrating these personal technical competencies has been designed to meet various control aspects of the relevant activity but leads to shortcomings elsewhere (Collins & Collins, 2012). This is not to deny the essential importance of having appropriate technical skills to cope with the challenges of the outdoor work context (OEG, 2011), and has been recognized as fundamental to university-based vocational outdoor education elsewhere, for example in Australia by Mann (2003). However, it has also led to competencies being questioned for more sophisticated outdoor jobs (Alison & Telford, 2005), and there are suggestions of a need to reconsider the way in which intra- and inter-personal skills are developed in order to meet the needs of an outdoor jobs market, which calls for increasingly complex

critical thinking for professional development, career progression, and mobility (Hickman & Collins, 2014; Hickman & Stokes, 2015).

Stott, Zaitseva, and Cui (2012) and Munge (2009) explore the notion that personal attributes and experience are key characteristics being sought by employers of outdoor graduates, but as Powell (1989) and Weick (1995) argue, experience alone is insufficient to develop applied workplace knowledge and expertise: sense making and meaning must also be brought to that experience. Gray, Hodgson, & Heaney (2011) propose that this platform of skills can benefit from targeted and refined reflective practice and in doing so endorse Schön's focus on the need to develop professional "artistry" (1983).

The role of reflective practice

The contribution of reflective practice to enhancing professional skills has been applied to, and studied in, contexts as varied as nursing (Rolfe, 2014; Trad & Larotta, 2014), social work (Wilson & Campbell, 2013), teaching (Jones & Jones, 2013), and to a lesser extent outdoor education (Ewert, Frankel, Puymbroeck, & Luo, 2010; Shorthill, 2011). However, many of its key aspects in relation to the development of outdoor practitioners remain under-researched (Hickman & Collins, 2014) and knowledge of how students acquire and develop professional expertise and autonomy in this sector remains limited. Consequently, reflective practice remains in need of greater clarification in terms of its foci and processes.

Accordingly, this paper reports on a small-scale study aimed at developing evidence in these two areas. The findings explain, underline, and explore a set of issues in relation to disconnections between academic and practice learning in outdoor training and therefore highlight an opportunity for the latter to be more instrumental in shaping the former. They also indicate ways forward that might offer better preparation for the challenges students are likely to encounter in the workplace. Students and tutors on similar courses in other countries, including Australia, might draw parallels.

Methodology

The study used a purposive sample of students on a higher education vocational outdoor course. A 35-strong cohort of second year students undertaking summer work experience of between 5 to 12 weeks' duration were invited to participate in the study, which required the keeping of reflective journals during their time in practice. Twenty students with an average age of just over 20 years volunteered; overall, nine females and six males returned data giving a response rate of 75% of the original sample group. All

had introductory levels of outdoor work experience gained through working the previous summer and/or semester time, volunteering in the local outdoor sector with, in total, an average of four months' practice experience each.

All participants were involved in the coaching of at least one adventure sport on a regular basis and had vocational aspirations ranging from teaching and adventure therapy to guiding and educational expedition leadership. The distinct differences between outdoor adventure, adventure recreation, adventure tourism, and outdoor education were acknowledged and a common theme identified where participants were using the outdoors to develop their own outdoor "learnacy," or the skills and knowledge about how to learn (Claxton, 2003). Thus, the specific outdoor context was a platform for understanding their own learning, being able to transfer this beyond their immediate environment, and to learn "better and faster" as a result.

Work experiences were self-generated in order to accommodate individual interests, be of an applied nature, maximize ownership and engagement, and could be international in focus. Jobs included: working as assistant leaders on 28- to 35-day formal educational expeditions to India, Peru and Borneo; working as development specialists using climbing, canoeing, tramping, and campcraft at large children's camps in Europe and the USA for periods up to 12 weeks and allocated to client groups for between six and ten days; operating as wilderness canoe trip leaders in northern Canada, again with the focus on personal development for young people. One student worked with an overseas charity providing adventure experiences for young people with cancer, whilst a small number of students worked at UK outdoor education centres providing summer season programmes for children and adolescents in a range of adventure sports and bushcraft.

The potential influence of the researcher(s) was acknowledged, especially as one of the authors was involved with the delivery of other aspects of the course that might have led some participants to report what they thought were professionally or strategically appropriate responses (Wiersma, 2000). However, following the approach of Trent (2010), participation (or not) would have no impact on grades awarded, and as work experience began after all course work had been assessed, participants were advised to access their marks prior to starting their jobs.

Focus groups (Barbour, 20012; Kemberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013) were conducted at three points in the research programme: prior to work experience, on immediate return to university, and eight weeks later — for review and confirmation. Focus groups were

chosen because there were no statistical data being sought and because the participants were familiar and confident with each other (conditions that precluded conformity and underpinned a robust exchange of ideas). Sessions were semi-structured with general questions being used at the start, and flexibility was planned-in so that the sequence could be changed in response to the issues raised. With the participants' permission, the sessions were recorded, and this paper uses reflective statements as sources of data to provide insight into their experiences (Clegg, 2000).

The size of the sample group lent itself to manual data analysis and, although time-consuming, this type of physical data management precluded researchers from becoming divorced, or at least estranged, from the data. Initial, free and open coding was followed by line analysis and the creation of themes through colour coding (Stokes, 2011). Respondent validation was used at each stage seeking to establish faithfulness and trustworthiness of interpretations (Silverman, 2014). Furthermore, the input of two critical friends was secured, one from within the outdoor sector, the other not, in order to challenge researcher bias. These strategies helped in identification of the most important themes emerging from this investigation. Pseudonyms were employed to protect individual identities throughout this work (Israel & Hay, 2006).

The relatively small sample size is acknowledged as being a potential limitation to this work but should not be interpreted as an obstacle to a rich data source (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Moon (2010) points to the value of storytelling as a support for learning in higher education, and the responses of participants are "given voice" in the tradition of oral history (Janesick, 2010). No claims to statistical generalization are made here and instead the aim was to establish preliminary insights into the way in which this cohort of vocational outdoor students understood reflective practice in the workplace.

Results and discussion

Reflective practice helped students to clarify and articulate three key learning areas in the workplace. Specifically, it helped students to understand and develop technical proficiency, supported awareness of the value of theory, and acted as a platform to express emergent concepts of "professionalism".

In terms of learning about reflective practice the findings were in agreement with the ideas of Thompson and Pascal (2012) who propose that the dominant focus on writing down reflections ignores the social dimension of learning, a particularly salient issue in the context of outdoor education. Students emphasized the capacity of the group to offer ways to question practice in non-threatening and collaborative

ways (Loughran, 2002) without overtones of confession, personal and/or organizational surveillance, or compliance (Kelsey & Hayes, 2015).

However, whilst questions were asked about the value of reflective practice assignments in their current format, the concept of using reflection for personal and professional development was appreciated as valuable and worthwhile, and the formal study of reflective practice was deemed essential in order that students develop the skills to facilitate client-based reflection beyond graduation and into their professional careers.

Participants articulated a preference for reflecting in ways other than in the traditional journal format. Initially, this was attributed to the expediency of the location: river, mountain, lake, or rock face. However, deeper critical discussion suggested that the multimedia environment that students were familiar with offered more options for meaningful reflection and that a fuller consideration of applying these to the curriculum was necessary.

Bridging experience and learning: Understanding the workplace *through* reflective practice

Understanding and developing technical proficiency

Understanding and developing technical proficiency dominated critical reflections. However, this must be kept in context because, for young practitioners at the outset of their career, the skills that determine employability are largely of an applied nature. For most, selecting work experience had meant identifying jobs that would allow the development of specific skills. As Sarah observed, "if I want to get on, I need to improve the range of tickets [National Governing Body (NGB) qualifications] I have" — a thought endorsed by Josh:

I wanted to improve my canoeing, so I needed to go canoeing. I chose tripping in Canada cos I knew that I'd be out for ten days at a time. Then at the end of three months I'd get the chance to take some awards that would be useful over there but also would put me in a better place for my BCU quallies [qualifications] when I got back. (Josh)

Reflection allowed for the consideration and resolution of technical problems, as evidenced by Mark who had led day-long hikes on the Spanish island of Mallorca, and for whom writing facilitated the exploration of reasoning:

Last time in the gorge I'd lost a sling.
After using it on a belay point to help a

client down-climb I put it under the rope strap on my rucksack. Back at the bus, it was gone, probably lost in the bushy section at the exit to the gorge. On my SPA [Single Pitch Award – climbing NGB qualification] I'd been taught to put a sling across my body, but didn't want to look all 'Rambo' in front of my group. Now I know why I'd been taught that and I won't lose a sling like that ever again! In the past I might have thought as far as not losing gear but this was more thinking about my motives and presentation. (Mark)

An interesting finding was that apart from helping students to understand technical skills, there was a unanimous perception that exhibiting these skills established competence, status, and social currency amongst peers, and functioned as a key selection criterion for promotion by senior staff. As Rachel observed, "at the end of the day, it's important to look good; clients might not notice whether you can climb or canoe, but your mates will, and the senior staff, and they notice when you get back to uni as well." Like others, Rachel also augmented her journal with reference to action camcorders, such as the highly versatile and universally portable GoPro, and the filming of other more adept performers:

I film somebody doing something that I want to do better, then write about it in my journal, specially what I need to do to improve, and if it's a task, I usually draw the layout too, boulders, eddy lines, anywhere there's a crux move really. (Rachel)

And as an adventure sports coach, Rachel also reflected on the tension between the concepts of reflection and feedback:

The theory says that the sooner we reflect, the stronger the image is going to be, but then for uni we're then asked to wait 'till later and put it in the journal. Odd. After everything that's happened that's a tough ask. Coaching, though, has been using instant video feedback for years, it's even on the syllabus here and for NGBs. Why can't we reflect in the same way we want our clients to? It would make more sense and we can even do it on our phones! (Rachel)

Supporting awareness of the value of theory

Reflections led to students being able to more effectively synthesize course-based theory with the applied demands of the workplace, as seen by Rachel's

comments above. Linking the coaching concepts of vertical and horizontal chaining, where movement sequences are divided into sub-components and routinized (with the aim of improving clients' movement skills) was another example of this, which Robin observed:

Using my journal, I understand the work we did last year on the coaching process better: I found myself drawing out the chains in my journal first and then making colour card cutouts for my clients to use. I now feel better setting tasks and use the cards to get them to discuss linking moves or what a technique's made up of. And, if I see another link I add it in a different colour. (Robin)

He continued with a key suggestion:

I should've really paid more attention when we went through this in class, but I didn't. We (third years) should talk to the first years and like *tell them to take notes!* (Robin)

This has led to course development with a more formal student mentoring system that endorses the value of communities of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This was a common reflective experience in the workplace and will be returned to later in this paper.

Jiri's reflections had helped her understand the role of commodification in the outdoors (Beames & Varley, 2013), and shape her opinion that the "sportification", or standardization of practice (Collinet, Delalandre, Schut, & Lessard, 2013), was positively impacting on opportunities for both practitioners and entrepreneurs. Like Robin, she had made extensive use of annotated diagrams in her journal. "They help me see things better if I draw them," she commented; "words are okay but I can't see patterns in the words." A mature student, Jiri's summer job had been guiding in a cave system in Wales where tensions between owners and users of mines had been growing. She went on:

Writing things down was so useful. I started off with concept maps and then tried to work out the relationships between all the elements. 'My' company ran educational history tours through the mine but in other systems zip wires, trampolines and funky lighting systems were being installed. There was a lot of friction over how mines should be used. However, putting ideas down in diagrams gave me a sort of 'chain of evidence'. A different experience in the mines means different customers and already there's a

shortage of qualified staff — that can only be good for jobs. And the new businesses? Well, twenty years ago indoor climbing was seen as a fad, and just like indoor walls, mines can be open for business whatever the weather. Twenty years ahead, who knows? It's my case study for Adventure Tourism. (Jiri)

However, others interpreted the theoretical links more negatively. Ian's reflections lamented that commodification meant less focus on relationship building: "It would be nice to get to know the kids more, but we don't have time.... Safety and names is all that counts.... The next day they go off on different activities and we're history." He continued, "I need to think about my choices more: if I want to teach, to make a difference, I need to cut out those places that make climbing a 'product'". Megan agreed, "Like, I was frustrated ... the boss' office at my place actually had a track of the 'units' on camp — what he meant was people! How can you connect with units?" Here the strong perception was that commodification might mean increased profitability but served to compromise educational impact (Kane & Tucker, 2007; Martin, 2008) and could act to alienate some vocational undergraduates from the outdoors as an "industry". For some in this cohort, reflective skills appeared to bring the tension between profitability, place, and intra- and inter-personal relationships back into mainstream focus (Hales, 2006).

Emergent concepts of professional behaviour

A growing body of literature has suggested that reflective practice creates the space to consider how actions, and arguably more importantly attitudes, create the cognitive space to articulate emergent concepts of professionalism (Cooper & Stevens, 2006; Kegan, 1994). Self-presentation, use of language, and self-management skills such as time management and organization characterized the reflections in this cohort. Dan, who had worked as a raft guide in Austria, was initially annoyed when his employer forbade the wearing of sandals whilst guiding:

I like thought WTF, you can't tell me what to wear on my feet; then I sort of worked it through. I might need to run along banks, through trees and all sorts. And if my river kit doesn't allow that, how can I be 'professional' in a flip, or whatever? And like, how do I get my clients to dress properly if I don't? It made sense, even though it sucked at first.

Similarly Debbie, working in France, had a role that included meeting and greeting teachers and head teachers who had accompanied school groups to the

activities centre, and had a dress code to adhere to, which included the company shorts and T-shirt, and again no sandals:

Like at first I really resented this, really, I didn't like it because it wasn't who I am, wasn't what I really wanted to do ... (but) the more I thought, the more I realized that the job needed a responsible face with these people, people who make the decisions ... and it was up to me to be that responsible person ... I realized that I'd been too keen to look cool to a group of 14–19 year olds, who I thought were my clients, and then I like realized that my real clients were the budget holders, the money people, and they needed to see the face of a professional. (Debbie)

Debbie also began to recognize the subtle links between social and professional action:

Most of those I worked with were doing other things at university, forensics, maths, most things but I was the only proper outdoor student on my camp. It meant most of them were spending the summer developing their hobby. They weren't unprofessional in any real way but the work obviously didn't mean anything to their studies or career. For me, though, I began to notice, to write down how my hobbies were also going to be part of my job and how I needed to, in a way, keep them separate. It also made me think more about the image I wanted to project, to think about looking professional means more than the clothes I stand up in. (Debbie)

Others learned important lessons about punctuality and had transferred these back to university. Andrea noted:

I was a river leader, so was responsible for four boats, that's four staff and eight clients. Every morning I held a short brief with staff first, then with the group. Staff were pretty good because they were contracted, but clients! They'd be arriving five minutes late whilst brushing their teeth. I either had to wait and brief everyone, or keep repeating myself. It was so frustrating because we were on the clock to leave and for pick up, and I thought it reflected so badly on people. It made me realize how really unprofessional it is to turn up late for a lecture. As a fresher (first year) I hadn't

noticed; now coming into my second year I'll notice everyone who isn't early, never mind isn't on time! (Andrea)

These examples indicate a developing awareness of the different skills required of a professional in the outdoor sector. These perceptions, shaped in the workplace, encourage students to develop ways in which professionalism is understood and articulated in that context. This is not only likely to enhance ownership of the professional process but also to highlight the value of reflective practice as an appropriate tool for achieving this. Additionally, for this cohort they allude to how the concept of "skill" has progressed beyond the purely procedural to include attitudes that support independent learning. The examples also suggest an emergence of confidence in the management of these skills, something recognized in other practice settings (Thompson & Pascal, 2012), but perhaps in need of more effective elaboration, as outdoor practitioners seek to gain recognition as a community of autonomous professionals (Cousquer, 2014).

Bridging experience and learning: Workplace opportunities to learn *about* reflective practice

Social learning in the outdoor sector

As a river leader responsible for a group, Andrea's experiences were similar to those of many of her peers, including Josh, Debbie, Jiri, and Mark, and pointed to the value of communities of expertise in the outdoor sector (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999). Employers had required they hold reflective sessions with their clients on a daily basis in order to explore learning and emphasize the educational value of their experiences, as Andrea shared:

We sit somewhere comfy, circles are supposed to be the best, but, you know, we just choose the 'right' spot on the beach [river bank] and take it in turns. Best part of my day, what I did well, what another person did to help me and/or the group, and what's my goal for tomorrow – that's what we talk about, and we use a standard routine, we don't write anything down. We do use the pictures, though, and they work. (Andrea)

Learning here was being seen as an activity situated in the unique dynamic of the group. Additionally, such learning was perceived as participatory and to be creating a local and legitimized knowledge between individuals based on the experience of events, people, places, and things, as Andrea illuminated:

The groups change, of course, but the routine stays the same. Eventually I realized, and I think others do too, that learning is better when you get involved. Those that didn't make the effort during the day's activities usually had less to contribute, and I guess the more effort you put in, the more you'll get back. As a first year I didn't realize that, I wanted to be taught, not to learn. Going into my third year I need to make that effort. (Andrea)

Thus, although learning might be specific to a particular group, Andrea was articulating her newly acquired knowledge about the mechanics of learning and the importance of establishing community in order to support the learning process. Engaging, contributing, and sharing as a practitioner meant dealing with experiences that the group recognized as important. She and others felt that this demystified reflective practice and gave it a contextualized, rather than an abstract meaning, endorsing the work of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002).

Also strongly expressed was the perception that this social dimension of learning was relatively free of "organizational surveillance" (Loughran, 2002), giving more ownership to participation and less control and straitjacketing by institutional strictures. This was particularly true when students were working with peers to review collective progress, as Dan commented, reflecting on his first few weeks' experience in Austria:

Our reflections, I suppose you'd call them that, were in the camp bar at the end of the day. It was nothing formal, but it happened everyday, and at the start, as a rookie, they were way useful. I could say I'd got a bad line at Tombstones or The Confluence [names of rapids] and it wasn't like a confession or I was up for a bollocking. Everybody chipped in with ideas; they'd all been there. And when replacements came in later in the season, even if they weren't rookie guides but were new to the area, I felt I could give advice, advice that wasn't a criticism, just advice based on my reflections I guess. (Dan)

Epp (2008) observes that the perception of a safe place for personal thoughts, ideas, and deep consideration reduces the likelihood of superficial reflections. The students began to recognize that for their personal development, and thus in their roles as facilitators of reflection in the workplace, trust and confidence in both instructional staff and the processes they support are key elements for a successful reflective experience.

In common with other courses where reflection forms a component of the assessment strategy, students felt that their applied experience of reflection in the workplace led to a change in attitude once back at university. Being required to reflect in a highly structured university-style format was felt to undermine the value of the learning process, particularly when written down: "We just don't do it that way when we're working," argued Mark, "so why do it this way here?" Communal reflective practice, as described by Andrea and Dan, was positively experienced across the cohort, and the relevance of creating mutually supportive communities of learning amongst both peers and clients acknowledged. These concepts have been extended into the academic environment, and at the time of writing, the staff and students involved in this project are working together with employers to reconsider ways of evaluating reflective practice in order to more effectively support professional development within the curriculum. Additionally, students have been able to positively re-examine the relationship between theory and practice, and appreciate their instrumentality in using the latter to shape the former. Knowing that their experience and critical skills form a powerful alliance, as Jiri noted: "Well I guess that says it all really, like if we hadn't reflected we wouldn't be able to make this change, not for us or those who come after us."

Different ways to reflect

As well as failing to mirror practice settings, another key learning point from this project was that the traditional academic focus of writing in journals, especially for assessment, was too narrow and restrictive. In order to create and retain richer learning opportunities a broader approach to capturing experiences was necessary.

Many had used a multimedia approach to augment their journal entries. This is consistent with studies that suggest broader autoethnographic techniques bring order to thoughts, trigger imaginative responses, and develop solutions to problems (Anderson, 2006; Muncey, 2010). Taught a new technique with a confidence rope to protect short but steep ascents or descents, Mark used prose, photographs, and diagrams to capture what he was learning:

I go back to my journal and look over stuff that I don't get to use every day but know I'll need in future — it sort of helps keep things fresh. Then I rig it on the stairs outside my room for practice and show Si [room mate]; we practice bringing each other up the stairs on the rope. Daft, but if I hadn't kept a journal, taken a photo, written myself a flow diagram, and wrote

about where I'd use it, I'd probably have forgotten. Teaching Si also makes me understand it more. (Mark)

This corroborates the work of Moon (2006) and of Chang (2008) who argue that the value of writing can be enhanced by supplementary material, and that multiple prompts serve to enrich episodes stored in long-term memory. Such processes can be facilitated by a range of approaches. We had used a form of modified appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) during applied work. Students had been encouraged to take digital photographs throughout each day's practical sessions and then use them as "photo elicitation" prompts for journal entries each evening. This had evolved into group discussions about perspectives, and once compared, individual snapshots of the same event triggered memories that were sometimes polar in opposition. The aim was to enhance students' awareness of other frames of reference, especially in workplace settings. The work of Boyd (2009) had been particularly useful here in outlining the role of story in cognition and establishing the value of the associated experience in long-term memory. Furthermore, Schank (1995) highlights stories as factors essential for shaping memories, triggering other indices for consideration, such as the moral and ethical implications of action, and importantly making these available for transfer as platforms for subsequent learning.

Josh, who could be working with a group for up to 10 days, shared his preference for using photographs and their potency for capturing feelings and emotions, and ultimately, generating more resonant meanings for participants:

After the first trip, we got clients to photo everything, the highs and lows and everything in-between. First time round the photos just showed smiling teenagers everyday, like there'd been no problems. And that just wasn't real. So we changed. Happy, sad, miserable, frustrated or just plain pissed-off we got photos of the lot, and plenty of selfies. Putting them together at the end then meant more. What they'd overcome, how they'd bounced back after an upset, it all told a totally different story. And when there were smiles and happy faces they meant more against the tougher times. (Josh)

Ian's questioning of "traditional" methods of reflective practice found a ready audience with many participants, particularly adventure sports coaches, but his comments also point up a more troubled and constantly searching disposition regarding effective approaches:

Personally, I don't mind reflection, it's just another way of reviewing. But for me as a climbing instructor it's how it's done that gives me problems. I review my own performance with a GoPro, and with clients' filming's like instant feedback and discussion. Writing stuff down doesn't really work when I'm coaching; sand diagrams maybe, but writing? No, not for me or my clients, and most of my work is about improving instant personal performance. We're encouraged to do it for our NGBs why not for our course? (Ian)

Additionally, students suggested that traditional modes of reflective practice favoured learning styles that were perhaps at variance with their preferences as visual and kinaesthetic learners, and for whom learning with others is preferred to studying in isolation. Focused discussion about their active participation in the workplace was perceived to consolidate and enhance their learning. Similarly, the freedom to self-select diagrams and maps helped students to bring the same order to their reflective experiences as more traditional methods of writing, reading, interpreting, and restructuring the written word. Rachel's drawings of her perceptions of tasks was an obvious example of this, as were Ian's use of sand diagrams.

The strongest point to emerge from this section of the data was that students often felt what might be colloquially term "journalled to death", and no single student professed not to reflect: instead, the one-size-fits-all of journaling was more strongly experienced as one-size-fits-none. In moving towards learnacy, a greater independence in choosing personal reflective structures was necessary. Additionally, the sense for participants of feeling obligated or compelled to write for tutors and practices divorced from the workplace, were strongly interpreted as undermining the value of reflective practice despite its overall contribution to learning being appreciated.

Conclusion

This study explored the value of reflective practice in the workplace setting with a group of vocational outdoor students, and the results appear to have a very positive impact on the students who participated and the academic staff conducting the research. Although not originally considered an exercise in action research, the outcomes are being used to engineer changes to the curriculum in order to align outdoor theory with the experience of practice.

The research identified that, whilst operating in the workplace, students focus their reflections on three main areas of learning through reflective

practice: understanding and developing technical skills; unpacking the value of theory; and enhancing emergent concepts of professionalism. Additionally, work experience generated learning about reflective practice. Most notably, students used their experiences of reflecting in social groups to challenge the traditional use of reflective practice that characterized the foundations of this study. This led to the consideration of alternative methods of reflection that mirrored common workplace practice and orientated towards the styles of learning intuitively more comfortable for this group. Refreshingly, no students in this study perceived reflective practice as failing to support their learning; on the contrary, its contribution to their personal development was acknowledged, as was its role in helping them understand and promote reflective practice as an essential sector skill.

Reflective practice was also recognized as being a fundamental tool in understanding and coping with the changing, and often confusing, climate of practice, and its value beyond graduation appreciated. Many students perceived themselves to be in paradoxical positions, of being aspirant autonomous professionals who at the same time were being constrained from above by increased governmental and managerial demands, and from below by greater consumer accountability.

Furthermore, participating in this research bestowed students with the confidence to challenge assumptions about the transfer of reflective practice from academic theory, based around journal writing and its assessment, to the outdoor workplace. Through interrogating these assumptions, students felt empowered to confront wider disconnections between theory and practice underpinning a greater confidence in their critical skills as they embarked on their third and final year at university.


Although the study of expertise and expert practice can be problematic, the findings of this study are promising in that they suggest that when reflecting in and through meaningful contexts, students were able to identify and articulate what was commonly held to be expert practice. This is an important platform for the transfer of knowledge between contexts and its shaping to fit new situations.

The authors, as researchers, also experienced benefits from this project, in particular gaining a clearer understanding of the way that work experience functions to help students learn both through and about reflective practice. Taken together, these findings suggest a continued role for reflective practice in the vocational outdoor curriculum but with modifications to enhance its relevance and effectiveness. It was encouraging that students embraced the value of reflective practice to both their

personal and professional development, and that their criticisms of it were focused on the mode of delivery only. However, it must also be recognized that with a small and highly localized sample group caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to other populations. It would be interesting to compare the experiences of other vocational outdoor students and it is reasonable to suggest that the methods used for this study might be applied to cohorts elsewhere.

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